

*The Critical Need for a Bilateral Samoan Language Institute to be Established by
The Governments of Samoa and American Samoa*

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Relevance and Importance of Language to an Ancient Culture:

I would like to begin by thanking our hosts and sponsors of this conference for the opportunity to share with you a few observations on a matter that is of utmost importance in my mind – the enhancement and protection of the Samoan language. We need to ensure that the *Faa Samoa* endures and remains a wellspring for future generations. The Samoan language, art, culture and tradition have contributed greatly to the rich heritage of the Samoan people. The enhancement and preservation of the Samoan culture has a fundamental and positive influence on Samoans everywhere.

Rabindranath Tagore, the first non-white recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature once said:

“On each race is the duty laid to keep alight its own lamp of mind. To break the lamp on any people is to deprive them of their rightful place in the world festival. He who has no light is unfortunate enough but utterly miserable is he who having it has been deprived of it or has forgotten all about it.”

I would like to use Tagore’s idea of language as a right, or as a means of defining ourselves in the world festival, as a theme for our discussion today. We are here to contemplate the challenges facing Samoan language communities. Why? Because language is central to defining who we are. Language is the way we share our deepest systems of belief. Language is the root of our cultural rituals, our spiritual beliefs, a way of thinking, enduring, continuing.

Is it any wonder then that historically the key to colonial domination was to suppress, or destroy, the language of indigenous peoples? Did you know today that “according to Krauss (1992a), as many as half of the estimated 6,000 languages spoken on earth are “moribund”; that is, they are spoken only by adults who no longer teach them to the next generation. An additional 40 percent may soon be threatened because the number of children learning them is declining measurably. In other words, 90 percent of existing languages today are likely to die or become seriously embattled within the next century.

That leaves only about 600 languages, 10 percent of the world’s total, that remain relatively secure for now. This assessment is confirmed, with and without such detailed estimates, by linguists reporting the decline of languages on a global scale, but especially in the Americas, Africa, Australia, and Southeast Asia (Robins & Uhlenbeck, 1991; Brenzinger, 1992; Schmidt, 1990) (Crawford, 1998).

The breath, the life of the Samoan culture, lies in its language. It is our way of defining our place in the world festival. We must find ways of keeping alight our own lamp of mind. As one scholar has noted, “we should care about preventing the extinction of languages because of the human costs to those most directly affected. “The destruction of a language is the destruction of a rooted identity” (Fishman, 191, p.4) for

both groups and individuals. Along with the accompanying loss of culture, language loss can destroy a sense of self-worth, limiting human potential and complicating efforts to solve other problems, such as poverty, family breakdown, school failure, and substance abuse. After all, language death does not happen in privileged communities. It happens to the dispossessed and the disempowered peoples who most need their cultural resources to survive.

“In this context, indigenous language renewal takes on an added significance. It becomes something of value not merely to academic researchers, but to native speakers themselves. This is true even in extreme cases where a language seems beyond repair. As one linguist sums up a project to revive Adnyamathanha, an Australian Aboriginal tongue that had declined to about 20 native speakers:

“It was not the success in reviving the language although in some small ways [the program] did that. It was success in reviving something far deeper than the language itself that sense of worth in being Adnyamathanha, and in having something unique and infinitely worth hanging onto’ (D.Tunbridge, quoted in Schmidt, 1990, p. 106.]” Crawford, 1999).

I believe our Samoan community already agrees in principle about the importance of protecting the language, and this conference is a prime example.

Language is what identifies us as a national, ethnic, or cultural society. It provides the foundation that is our way of life. Over 2,000 distinct languages and dialects are spoken across the Pacific Islands. These languages are under threat from the impact of increasing change, and at risk of being consumed by Western ways. Traditional knowledge, music, dance, and oral traditions are in danger of being replaced by the stereotyped mass culture that is perpetuated by the media and information highways. We are now at a crossroads on what is seen as important in sustaining the Samoan language.

Supreme Institute for the Science of the Hebrew Language:

What does this mean in terms of the Samoan language? Maybe I can best answer that by saying what it means for Israel and the Hebrew language. In 1948, with the creation of the state of Israel, a culture that had been lost for 2,000 years was reestablished with the rebirth of the Hebrew language. As a matter of language policy, the government of Israel through national legislation established a Supreme Hebrew Language Institute in 1953 to ensure the renewal of the Hebrew language.

The Institute is an “academy of the language,” and the “function of the Institute” is to guide the development of the Hebrew language on the basis of research, and prescribes standards for modern Hebrew grammar, orthography, transliteration, and punctuation based upon the study of Hebrew historical development. The Academy

consists of 23 members and an additional 15 academic advisors, all outstanding scholars from the disciplines of languages, linguistics, and Judaic studies. Its members also include poets, writers, and translators. It should also be noted that:

“Decisions of the Institute as to matters of grammar, spelling, terminology or transliteration, published by the Minister of Education and Culture...shall be adhered to by educational and scientific institutions, by the government and its departments and agencies, and by the local authorities...” [Law 5713 (1953)]

On my previous visits to the City of Jerusalem in Israel, and especially when visitors like myself were allowed to offer words of prayer at the Wailing Wall of the ancient Temple that the Israelites built centuries ago, I could not help but feel impressed by the ability of a people to maintain its cultural identity despite centuries of severe persecutions from other races, nationalities and religious organizations. It is amazing how an ancient language like Hebrew can be brought back to life within a matter of five decades, and I have every reason to believe that the Hebrew language will continue to play a most critical role by defining the “soul and well being” of every Israeli man, woman and child for generations to come.

Another matter that should be of great interest to us is the fact that any person who returns to Israel to live – regardless if the person is 70 years old or in kindergarten – the government of Israel has a standing policy whereby the person is required to attend school to learn the Hebrew language.

Critical Now To Establish A Samoan Language Institute for Both Samoan Governments

I believe the time has come that after some fifteen years of discussions and conducting forums and conferences on the Samoan language, it is critically important now to call for a major initiative in the highest level of government of both Samoan and American Samoa either by executive directive or by law, an establishment of a bilateral Samoan Language Institute to provide for the cultivation, protection, and revitalization of the Samoan Language.

Without having to reinvent the wheel again, the leaders of Samoa and American Samoa may want to examine closely how the Hebrew and Maori languages were developed and transformed by the government leaders of Israel and New Zealand. While others may disagree, I do believe that the Samoan Language Institute should be established as a matter of law, so that there is “official” recognition of its decisions when questions are raised on matters of spelling, grammar, terminology, and transliteration. It is also critically important that both government entities should appropriate the necessary funds for the operation of the Institute.

The Institute should also organize, research and produce a comprehensive Samoan-English dictionary that would include the transformation of English words into

the Samoan language. To date, there does not exist a complete and accurate Samoan-English Dictionary.

We are painfully aware of the fact there are limitations in the Samoan language and its inability to cope with hundreds of thousands of English words that describe new technologies in the sciences, the arts, law, medicine, and the environment. We need not remind ourselves that we have all now become overnight experts in the field of linguistics by inventing new Samoan words and phrases from English, and simply put, it is a mess.

It is my sincere hope that the Institute will be the institution where our own people with the highest level of expertise and academic credentials, along with those who have tremendous depth in understanding our traditions and culture relative to the usage of Samoan words – would be tasked with the most difficult responsibility – of serving as the official governing body that will create, define, and adopt new words to the Samoan language.

Institute Organization

The foundation for the Institute is already in place. Years ago a Memorandum of Understanding was established between Samoa and American Samoa through their memberships with the South Pacific Commission, now known as the Pacific Community. I recalled that the late Governor A.P. Lutali and the late Prime Minister Va'ai Kolone met in Ofu, Manu'a, whereby both leaders signed the Memorandum. The Memorandum calls for the Prime Minister and the Governor to meet periodically and to discuss issues that are of mutual interest to both Samoas. Among the issues that the Memorandum specifically cited is the need for the two leaders to hold consultations for the preservation, enhancement and promotion of the Samoan culture and its traditions. It is quite obvious that the Samoan language is a critical component of these consultations on our culture. Here are a few suggestions on the organization and structure of the Institute:

- (1) The Prime Minister of Samoa and the Governor of American Samoa issue a joint directive for a special task force to review, assess, and offer recommendations on how to organize the Samoan Language Institute;
- (2) That the Task Force be composed of the Minister of Education (Samoa), the Director of the Department of Education (American Samoa), the Chancellor of the National University (Samoa), the President of the American Samoa Community College, the President of the Samoan Language University (Samoa), and three additional representatives to be selected at large by the Prime Minister and the Governor;
- (3) The Task Force is to be co-chaired by the Minister of Education and the Director of Education;

- (4) The Task Force is to conduct field hearings in both Samoa and American Samoa;
- (5) The Task Force should submit its report and recommendations to the Prime Minister and Governor within six months after research and hearings have been completed;
- (6) The governments of Samoa and American Samoa should provide at least USD \$100,000 to authorize the task force to begin its work at the earliest time possible.

I would hope that within the next two years, the Samoan Language Institute should be officially established with the necessary staff and funds to be provided by both governments to continue its work for the benefit of the Samoan people, now and for generations to come.